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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the rationale, research design, analytical approaches, and results of a graduate admission study which examined the motivation and enrollment decision processes of students accepted to a newly redesigned Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program. The study was developed collaboratively by the institution's Office of Institutional Research, the Graduate School Dean, and the Admissions Director. A mail survey drew a response from 228 (of 334) students accepted into the program. Analysis identified three factors as the strongest influence on students' degree choice: career advancement, personal fulfillment, and career change. Statistically significant differences were found between students enrolling in the program and those not enrolling on the importance of three graduate school characteristics: program structure, school size, and opportunities for friendship. Discriminant analysis identified student ratings on program characteristics as the strongest predictor of enrollment. Nine recommendations for encouraging program enrollment by accepted students are offered including: (1) encourage prospective students to visit the campus; (2) focus financial aid decisions on increasing the quality of students; (3) document and promote the value of the school's degree for post-graduate employment; and (4) emphasize the value of the school's international student body and study programs for successful employment in the international economy. (Contains 14 references.) (DB)

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A Collaborative Approach to Designing Graduate Admission Studies: A Model for Influencing Program Planning and Policy

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ABSTRACT

**A Collaborative Approach to Designing Graduate Admission Studies:
A Model for Influencing Program Planning and Policy**

This paper presents the methodology and results from a completed graduate admission study of 334 students accepted to a newly redesigned Master of Business Administration Program. Results identify three factors as the strongest influence on students' degree choice: career advancement, personal fulfillment, and career change. Statistically significant differences were found between enrolling and non-enrolling students on the importance of three graduate school characteristics: program structure, school size, and opportunities for friendship. Discriminant analysis identified student ratings on program characteristics as the strongest predictor of enrollment. The paper illustrates how a collaborative approach to research enhanced the study's impact on policy.

A Collaborative Approach to Designing Graduate Admission Studies: A Model for Influencing Program Planning and Policy

Introduction

Purpose. This paper presents the rationale, research design, analytical approaches and significant results from a completed graduate admission study which examined the enrollment decision processes of students accepted to a newly redesigned Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program. The immediate purpose of this study was to acquire an in-depth understanding of the motivation and enrollment decision factors for accepted students; to obtain information about the School's image among prospective students; and to identify the School's competitive position in the marketplace. The paper demonstrates how the research was used to assess the attractiveness of the program; to craft recruitment strategies to attract the optimum number of high quality students; and to develop strategic policy recommendations to promote further innovative program initiatives.

Program Description. This study was sponsored by and conducted for a graduate school of business in the northeast. The School is committed to being an internationally recognized leader in graduate management education. To achieve this goal, the school recently created and implemented an innovative curriculum that focuses on the following learning outcome areas: team-based learning; pragmatic thinking; a cross-functional perspective; a business-wide perspective; persuasive communication; and a global opportunity orientation.

Review of the Literature

Three streams of literature provide a theoretical background and research base for the present study: first, the extensive body of research examining undergraduate students' college choice process; second, research on the enrollment decision process of graduate students in general; and third, specific studies focused on the enrollment decision processes of graduate business students.

Undergraduate College Choice Studies. At the undergraduate level, Chapman's (1981) generalized model identified structural and attribute variables - such as demographic characteristics, college characteristics and financial aid needed - and the relationship of these variables to students' college selection. Offering a relevant conceptual framework, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three stage model of college choice: the first, predisposition stage is one in which familial, societal and economic factors generate interest and attitudes conducive to college enrollment; the second, search phase occurs when college bound students proactively explore potential institutional options or choice sets and evaluate their academic and financial capabilities in relation to these potential choices; and the third and final stage is one in which students make their final selection from available options. An extensive number of empirical studies have documented the influence of student background variables on college choice. Notable examples include family income (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983; Flint, 1992) and students' ability (Galotti & Mark, 1994; and Fink, 1997).

Previous studies have also established the relationship between students' perception of the following institutional characteristics and their college choice: the quality of staff/faculty, types of degree programs, faculty student interaction, and financial assistance (Coccari & Javalgi, 1995); good academic reputation, affordability, good job placement, and well managed facilities

(Comm & LaBay, 1996); and career preparation, distance from home, the quality of the school's research program, and library resources (Martin's, 1996).

Graduate School Admission Studies. Based on her review of the graduate admission literature, Kallio (1995) reports that graduate student decisions are affected by some of the same factors influencing undergraduate students: namely, the academic reputation of the institution; program quality and size; price; financial aid; geographic location; contact with faculty; and individual student characteristics, such as academic ability and achievement. Where graduate students appear to differ from undergraduates involves the greater influence of spouse, family and work considerations. Olson and King (1985) offer a preliminary model of graduate students' college choice that specifies three major factors influencing initial consideration of a graduate school - geographic location, personal contact with the faculty; and the reputation of the department, and three additional factors as determinants of the final decision: a positive interaction with university personnel, personal reasons, and previous undergraduate attendance. In a study of over 1,000 new graduate students, Malaney (1987) found that students pursued graduate education more frequently to fulfill their desire to learn more and to achieve personal satisfaction rather than to accomplish job related goals. Findings also indicated that students chose a particular institution primarily because of its good academic reputation. Financial concerns and the location were the next two most important reasons.

Business School Admission Studies. Research on the choice process of business and management students is most pertinent to the present study. Stolzenberg and Giarrusso (1987) reported that career entry or mobility was the most frequently reported reason for pursuing an MBA. However, respondents at schools with highly competitive admission processes were more

likely than others to emphasize the development of management skills and business knowledge as their primary reason for pursuing the MBA degree. McClain, Vance and Wood (1984) found that investment of the school's resources, in terms of time and financial aid resources, had the most significant positive effect on students' final choice of a graduate business school. Webb's (1992) research, with approximately 1500 graduate business students, identified academic reputation and accreditation as the two most important fixed college characteristics; the availability of evening classes and the quality of the program as the two most important program characteristics; and the potential marketability of the degree as the only marketing factor perceived to influence business students' college choice decisions.

Methodology

This study was designed by the author in collaboration with the Graduate School Dean and Admissions Director. This collaboration allowed the administrators an opportunity to identify the critical information they were seeking regarding accepted students' perceptions of the School and the graduate program. The author proposed topics relevant to admission research and recommended ideas regarding the design of the instrument. Data were collected by means of a mailed survey which was sent to 334 students accepted for the fall 1997 two-year MBA Program. A response rate of 71 percent was achieved - 94 percent for enrolling students and 55 percent for non-enrolling students.

The respondent group included 238 accepted students; 55 percent enrolled and 45 percent did not enroll at our school. In terms of demographic characteristics, the majority, 67 percent, were male and 63 percent were single. The mean age was 28. The reported previous year's gross annual incomes for these accepted students ranged from less than $20,000 to over $140,000. Close to 40 percent reported annual incomes between $20,000 and $40,000 and 30 percent

reported incomes ranging from $40,000 to $60,000. Only 7 percent reported incomes of $100,000 or higher. The majority of these accepted students had some work experience prior to applying for an MBA program. Sixty-seven percent earned their Bachelor's degree between 1990 and 1994. Only 15 percent graduated from college more recently, between 1995 and 1997. These students are academically superior. Seventy percent earned scores of 600 or higher on the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) with a score range from 200 to 800.

Results

Reasons for Pursuing an MBA. Successful recruitment of prospective MBA students requires an understanding of why these students might pursue an MBA degree. Results from this research identify three primary reasons motivating accepted students' decisions to pursue an MBA degree. Some 75 percent identified career advancement; another 66 percent reported personal fulfillment; and 50 percent cited career change as their primary or secondary reason for pursuing an MBA. These results bear implications both for recruitment strategies and curriculum development. Further research might investigate what knowledge and skills are required for students to achieve career advancement; in what ways students are seeking personal fulfillment through the MBA Program and what are the typical career changes prospective students are seeking to achieve. Information on these issues could then be used in guiding program revisions to support students' goals.

Importance of Graduate School Characteristics. Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of 17 graduate school characteristics in relation to their choice. Ninety-two percent rated the institution's academic reputation as ' very important ', and 87 percent rated both the quality of teaching and the value of the degree as ' very important '. These factors which hold the highest level of importance relate to essential aspects of the graduate degree program. In

contrast, issues of much less importance include on-campus housing, employer tuition reimbursement, job availability and educational plans of spouses; fewer than 10 percent rated these factors as ' very important ' in their graduate school choice.

Chi-square analyses identified statistically significant differences between enrolling and non-enrolling students on three of 17 characteristics: school size ($X2 = 6.20$, $p \leq .05$), program structure and requirements ($X2 = 13.02$, $p \leq .001$), and opportunities for friendship ($X2 = 5.98$, $p \leq .05$). These data indicated that enrolling students prefer the smaller size of our school. They also value the innovative program and collegial environment conducive to forming friendships.

Top Competitor Graduate Schools. This study identified two sets of competitor graduate schools with which the study school competed for the largest number of accepted students. The first top application competitor set included the ten graduate schools with which the study school shared the largest number of applications, and the second top alternative choice competitor set included the graduate schools most frequently chosen by the non-enrolling students and the schools reported by the enrolling students as their top alternative choice. The top alternative choice schools were also classified in two subgroups: those with which we yielded more than 50 percent of accepted students and those with which we yielded less than or equal to 50 percent of accepted students. Subsequent analyses were conducted to determine how our school differed from these sets of competitor institutions in terms of accepted students' evaluation of the admission process and their ratings of various enrollment decision factors.

Evaluation of the Admission Process. Prospective students' experience during the admission process represents a potentially definitive influence on their enrollment decision regarding a particular graduate school. Therefore, survey respondents were asked to evaluate

several sources of information and experiences encountered during the admission process both at our school and at alternative choice graduate schools. Aspects of the admission process specified include publications, organized admission activities, and contact with significant individuals, such as students and faculty. Table 1 identifies the admission experiences with significantly different ratings for our school compared with alternative choice graduate schools.

Table 1. Significant Differences Between Accepted Students' Ratings of Admission Experiences at Our Graduate School and Alternative Choice Graduate Schools

	Mean Ratings			
Admission Experience	**Our School**	**Alt. Choice**	**Mean Diff.**	**t Ratio**
Promptness of Reply to Requests	3.46	3.11	0.35	3.51***
Individual Attention	3.51	3.19	0.32	3.33***
Telephone Contact with Admissions	3.42	3.14	0.28	2.76**
Correspondence with Admissions	3.51	3.23	0.28	3.07**
Visit to Campus	3.55	3.34	0.21	2.00*
Graduate School Guide Ratings	3.35	3.52	-0.17	-2.29*
Financial Aid Communication	2.81	3.18	-0.37	-2.29*

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

As illustrated in Table 1, the mean ratings are higher for our graduate school on five of the seven admission experiences. These superior ratings reflect a high level of satisfaction with promptness of reply to requests, individual attention, correspondence and telephone contact with the admission office, and the visit to campus. In contrast, the two admission experiences with superior ratings for the alternative choice schools are graduate school guide ratings and financial aid communication.

Influence of Enrollment Decision Factors. Survey respondents were asked to rate our school and their alternative choice school on several enrollment decision factors that students typically

consider in their choice of a graduate school. These factors included academic issues, such as academic reputation, access to faculty, and team-based learning; financial factors concerning tuition, type of financial aid, and expected cost after financial aid; social factors relating to social activities, and the quality and diversity of the student body; and personal considerations regarding distance from home and spouse's preference.

T test analyses identified statistically significant differences between accepted students' ratings of enrollment decision factors for our school and alternative choice graduate schools on 13 of 27 factors. Table 2 presents selected examples of these differences; seven involve superior mean ratings for our school.

Table 2. Significant Differences between Accepted Students' Ratings of Enrollment Decision Factors for Our School and Alternative Choice Schools

	Mean Rating			
Enrollment Decision Factor	**Our School**	**Alternative Choice**	**Mean Difference**	**t Ratio**
International Study Programs	3.45	2.64	.81	7.20***
Field-Based Programs	3.45	2.74	.71	6.69***
Program Structure/Requirements	3.37	2.91	.46	5.06***
Team-Based Learning	3.44	3.04	.40	4.58***
Access to Faculty	3.40	3.06	.34	3.73***
Class Size	3.11	2.83	.28	3.39***
Specific Academic Programs	3.37	3.12	.25	2.64**
Social Activities	2.61	3.09	-.48	-3.55***
Tuition and other Expenses	1.99	2.48	-.49	-4.67***
Alumni Network	2.60	3.18	-.57	-4.70***

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

These data reflect a very high regard for our graduate program. All of the statistically significant, superior mean ratings refer to characteristics of the program including international study programs, field-based programs and the program structure and requirements. In contrast, all

of the significantly higher mean ratings for the alternative choice graduate schools involved non-academic, programmatic issues. Examples include social activities, tuition and other expenses, and alumni network.

Enrollment Decision Scales. Table 3 presents the names, components and reliability coefficients for four scales that were created in an effort to simplify the quantitative data and develop reliable measures of enrollment decision factors. A student's score on these scales is based on his or her mean response on the component items. As reflected in the reliability coefficients, the internal consistency for three of the four scales are moderately strong.

Table 3
Description of the Enrollment Decision Scales

Program Characteristics (alpha = .76)*	**Academic Quality** (alpha = .78)
Program Structure/ Requirements	Academic Reputation
Area of Specialization	Graduate School Faculty
Field-Based Programs	Graduate School Ranking
Specific Academic Programs	Teaching Reputation
Career Network (alpha = .77)	**Diversity/International Programs** (alpha = .62)
Alumni Network	
Post-Graduate Employment	
Quality of the Student Body	Diversity of the Student Body
	International Study Programs

* alpha = Chronbach alpha reliability coefficient

Predicting Students' Choice for the F.W. Olin Graduate School. Discriminant analysis was employed to determine which combination of variables would predict accepted students' enrollment decision. Bivariate analyses were utilized to identify potential predictors for the discriminant analysis. Variables examined included demographic characteristics; educational background; financial aid status; students' ratings on the importance of various graduate school

characteristics; their admission experience at our school; and their ratings of our school on various enrollment decision factors.

Results revealed no statistically significant differences between enrolling and non-enrolling students for the following variables: gender; marital status; annual income; age; year of graduation from college; and the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) scores. Financial aid data were reviewed. However, the numbers of respondents providing these data were too small to support statistical analyses.

Preliminary analyses did identify statistically significant differences in students' ratings on the importance of school size; the program structure and requirements; employee tuition reimbursement; and opportunities for friendship in the choice of a graduate school. Statistically significant differences were also found between enrolling and non-enrolling students' mean ratings on the following admission experiences for our school: graduate school guide ratings; fellow employees; graduate school information session; communication about financial aid; visit to campus; and contact with enrolled students. Finally statistically significant differences were found between enrolling and non-enrolling students' ratings for our school on four enrollment decision factor scales: academic quality, program characteristics, career network, and diversity/international programs. Variables with statistically significant differences in the bivariate analyses were included in the preliminary discriminant analyses. The number of cases, relationships among variables, and the goal of identifying the most efficient set of predictors determined which variables were included in the final model.

Table 4 displays discriminant analysis results with the discriminant function coefficients for each of the predictors of students' enrollment decision in the final model. As shown, the strongest predictor is students' rating on program characteristics followed by student diversity

and international programs, career network, graduate school guide ratings and academic quality. Students were significantly more likely to enroll at our school to the extent that they rated our school positively on these factors. The discriminant function including these five variables accurately predicted the enrollment decision of 77 percent of the respondents. The canonical correlation of .47 indicates that this function explains 22 percent of the variance in accepted students' enrollment decision.

Table 4. Discriminant Analysis Results: Predicting Students' Enrollment Decision

Predictors	Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients	Percent Correctly Classified
		77%
Program Characteristics	.51	
Student Diversity & International Programs	.38	
Career Network	.28	
Graduate School Guide Ratings	.21	
Academic Quality of the Program	.13	
Canonical Correlation	.47	

X^2 =48.09; df=5; $p \leq .001$

Strategic Program and Policy Recommendations

Results from this research provided statistically significant and convincing evidence that accepted students who chose to enroll at the study school did so primarily because of the strength and attractiveness of the graduate degree program. Furthermore, the data also showed that accepted students' propensity to enroll was confirmed through the professional and personal services of the Graduate Admissions Team. The general recommendation from the study was that, in order to sustain the success achieved to date, the Graduate School must continue to exercise innovative leadership in curriculum and the Graduate Admission Team must continue to offer superior professional and personal services to prospective students. In addition, to enhance the

School's stature, the study included a set of 15 strategic policy recommendations focused on three priority areas: student selectivity, placement success; and reputation. Each recommendation was supported with a rationale based on the study findings. The following discussion provides the context and examples of these recommendations.

Student Selectivity

Both the admissions and financial aid offices perform crucial roles in achieving the goals of student selectivity. The quality of students' experiences with these offices and the competitiveness of the financial aid offers exert potentially significant effects on students' decisions whether or not to enroll in a particular graduate school. Given the importance of student selectivity to graduate rankings and consequently to the School's reputation, admissions and financial aid policies should be designed to attain high yields among students with high GMAT scores and high undergraduate grade point averages. The following recommendations are intended to sustain and enhance the levels of selectively for accepted students.

1. Continue the graduate admission team's highly professional and personal services.

Accepted students offered very positive comments regarding the professional and personal services offered by the Graduate School Admission Team. Further, statistical analyses identified significantly higher mean ratings for our school, compared with competitor graduate schools, on several admission experiences including promptness of reply to requests, individual attention, correspondence with admissions and visit to campus.

2. Encourage prospective students to visit the campus and meet enrolled students.

Accepted students offered very positive evaluation of their visit to campus. Over 60 percent rated the visit to campus, contact with students and the graduate school information session

' very positively '. Further, statistical analyses revealed that enrolled students' mean ratings were significantly higher than that of non-enrolling students on these factors.

3. Involve well-trained graduate students in the admission process.

Accepted students expressed an interest in having contact with enrolled students. However, they also emphasized that students should be well prepared and professional.

4. Improve the timeliness of admission decisions; communicate decisions earlier.

Several non-enrolling students advocated earlier admission decisions. More timely notices may increase the School's yield since other institutions are operating on an earlier time schedule.

5. Focus financial aid decisions on increasing the quality of students.

Offering superior financial aid awards in the form of scholarships and grants may be necessary at this critical stage of the School's development; the School is now competing with very prestigious national institutions for the highest quality students. Further, both enrolling and non-enrolling students in this study urged the School to offer more financial aid to help students cover the cost and to be competitive with other graduate schools.

Career Placement

The School should intensify its investment in career placement and expand efforts to improve the perception of the School's success in securing superior placements for graduates. This recommendation is based both on results from this research as well as on the priority given to career placement in the graduate school rankings.

6. Document and promote the value of the school's degree for post-graduate employment.

Enrolling students' mean rating for post-graduate employment opportunities at the study school was significantly higher than that of non-enrolling students. Further, post-graduate employment was one of the top three most frequently reported reasons for non-enrolling students' school choice.

Reputation of the Graduate School

Results from this research provide impressive evidence that the School is highly regarded for its innovative graduate school curriculum. The following recommendations were proposed to promote continued success in marketing the program; to expand the program's focus to attract students who may have diverse interests; and to proactively influence the School's reputation both at the national and international levels. Targeted informational campaigns are proposed to ensure that business school deans, corporate leaders, recruiters and prospective students are aware of the accomplishments and excellence of the School's faculty and graduate program.

7. Continue to promote and publicize the School's innovative graduate curriculum.

The strength of the graduate program is clearly a competitive advantage for the School. Some 50 percent or more of the accepted students rated the School ' excellent ' on several aspects of the graduate program, including the field-based program, team-based learning, area of specialization, and program structure. Also, accepted students' mean ratings on these program characteristics were significantly higher for the Graduate School, compared with alternative choice schools, and the enrolling students' mean ratings were significantly higher than that of the non-enrolling students on each of these program characteristics for the Graduate School.

8. Emphasize the value of the School's international student body and study programs for successful employment in the international economy.

Fifty-four percent of the accepted students rated the School ' excellent ' on international study programs, and their mean rating on international study programs was significantly higher for our school compared with all alternative choice schools as well as with a subset of highly competitive alternative choice schools. Also, the enrolling students' mean rating was significantly higher than that of non-enrolling students for international study programs at our school.

9. Convince prospective students of the Graduate School's expanding reputation.

Several accepted students discussed how important a graduate school's reputation was in their enrollment decision. Ninety-two percent of the survey respondents reported that an institution's academic reputation was ' very important ' in their choice of a graduate school. Both enrolling and non-enrolling students most frequently reported academic reputation as the primary reason for their graduate school choice, and several students expressed the hope that the Graduate School's excellence would become more widely known nationally and internationally.

Dissemination and Utilization of the Research Findings

Dissemination of the results from this research included a preliminary presentation of the findings to the Graduate School Dean and the Graduate Advisory Board followed by a complete report to the President, the President's Cabinet, the Graduate School Dean, and the Graduate Admission Director. In addition, an executive summary was distributed to members of the Graduate Advisory Board. The board consists of 24 high-level executives selected for their exceptional stature in the business community and their commitment to the College. Following the distribution of the reports, the author made presentations and engaged in discussions

concerning the implications of the results. Audiences for these presentations and discussions included the Graduate School Dean, the Graduate Admission Director and staff, the Director of Career Services, and members of the Graduate Advisory Board.

Communication from the Graduate School Dean and the Director of Graduate Admissions verified that the results of the study were used not only to validate and enhance the recognized strengths of the Graduate School, but also to implement recommended changes for program improvement. As a result of the study, the Graduate School continued to make a strong personal investment in the admission program emphasizing individual attention, visits to campus, and the involvement of the Dean at information sessions. Recruitment strategies also continued to highlight the strengths of the program with its unique interdisciplinary, team-based and field-based learning experiences and opportunities for participation in a dynamic international program. Further, as a result of the study, the Graduate School developed strategies to improve financial aid communication and the MBA Admission Forum; to increase guidebook ratings; and to intensify the focus on career services. Finally, according to the Dean, the study strengthened the administration's position relative to the design of career paths within the academic program.

Discussion

Reasons for Pursuing Graduate Study. Findings from this study confirm previous research results regarding the reasons business students pursue graduate education, but they differ somewhat from conclusions about graduate students in general. The vast majority of respondents in this study, 75 percent, reported career advancement as their most or second most important reason for pursuing an MBA degree. Another 66 percent identified personal fulfillment and 50 percent cited career change as their primary or secondary reason for pursuing an MBA degree. Business students' focus on careers in consistent with the research of Stolzenberg and Giarrusso

(1987) who reported that career entry or mobility was the most frequently reported reason for pursuing an MBA. In contrast, Malaney (1987), who studied a group of new graduate students, found the desire to learn more as the most frequently reported reason for pursing graduate study, followed by the desire to achieve personal satisfaction.

Reasons for Institutional Choice. Data from this study revealed that the most important factors in students' choice of a graduate school were academic reputation, quality of teaching and value of the degree from this school. Similarly, Webb's (1992) research with approximately 1500 graduate business students identified academic reputation as one of two most important fixed college characteristics and the potential marketability of the degree as the only marketing factor perceived to influence business students' college choice decisions.

Evaluation of the Admission Experience. Respondents' evaluation of their admission experience reflected a very high regard for the personal and professional services offered by the graduate admission team. Their ratings and comments emphasized the importance of individual attention, promptness of reply to requests, communication with the admissions staff, as well as visit to campus and contact with enrolled students. In an earlier study, McClain, Vance and Wood (1984) also found that investment of the school's resources, in terms of time as well as financial aid resources had the most significant positive effect on students' final choice of a graduate business school.

Enrollment Decision Factors. Clearly, the strongest determinant of our students' decision to enroll was their positive evaluation of the program. Similarly, Kallio (1995), Olson and King (1985), and Webb (1992) also found that program quality or reputation of the department was a significant influence on students' decision to choose a particular institution. Finally, the discriminant analysis model produced from this research highlights several variables found to be

significant predictors of students' enrollment decision in previous research. Examples include students' evaluation of the program; perceived opportunities from a career network; and the value of the degree from the school.

Conclusion. This paper demonstrates how applied research was used to evaluate the impact of an innovative, interdisciplinary curriculum, particularly in terms of the school's image among prospective students and perceived position among competitor peer institutions. Results from this research expand the body of knowledge regarding graduate admission. Further, the collaborative approach to applied research from the design phase through the dissemination of the results provides a model for other researchers seeking to evaluate and influence graduate admission and professional degree programs.

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